

## **MUNOFS VI Research Report**

**Forum:** Special Conference On Water (MDG 7c)

**Issue:** Is Water a Human Right or a Commodity

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### **Introduction:**

Water is a necessity of all living organisms; all living organisms on Earth require water to be able to live and survive. Because of this fact, it can be said that water is required a human right, as it is essential to our survival, and we are greatly dependent on it. Not only do we use water for consumption, we also use water for sanitation, domestic usage and vegetation growth. However, water can sometimes be seen as a commodity, as water has transformed from a public good into an economic good. The commodification of water has sparked many controversies amongst the population, as it parallels with the fear of water scarcity and environmental degradation. Only around 10% of our available fresh water is used for domestic reasons, while the remaining 90% is used for industry and irrigation, which shows that water used more as a commodity, and not for domestic use. Many individuals can argue that water is a right; a necessity for humans. However many individuals may argue that water is more of a commodity, and must be used for economic means. This means that if water is solely for domestic use, then there is less water for economic use, however if water is solely used for economic means, then there is less water used domestic means.

### **Key Terms Defined:**

**Right to Water:** A formal international human rights law, that acknowledges the human right to water and sanitation.

**Commodification of Water:** The process of transforming water from a public good that is accessible, into a tradable commodity, which is also known as an economic good. This essentially the transformation of water from a public good, into an economic good.

**Commodity:** A good or service that can be traded or exchanged in the marketplace for another commodity or money.

**Right:** Legal, social or ethical principles of freedom or entitlement. They are rules about what is allowed of people or owed to people, according to some sort of legal system, ethical theory, or social convention.

**Privatisation:** To transfer a business, industry or service, from a public to a private ownership and

control.

## **General Overview:**

### **History**

The commodification of water is not a new phenomenon, however the commodification of water has significantly increased during the 20th century. This was due to the economic globalisation during the 20th century. Many countries, at the time, restructured their economic systems in order to be able to pay off their debts. Water soon became an economic good during this economic globalisation. Water started to become a key ingredient to many industries, such as agriculture. This caused water to become viewed as something that could be used to trade/sell, rather than it being used for domestic consumption.

Many problems with water were occurring at the same time as water transforming from a public good, into an economic good. Water was starting to become less accessible for many people, as well as water become more scarce as the demand for it rose. The increase in demand of water greatly hindered the accessibility of water towards many people, especially those who lived in LEDC's, where less clean water is available due to its location and/or sanitation. Water is universally fundamental, however because of the high demand of water in the economy, many people lost access to water. Privatisation of water also caused many people to lose their accessibility to water, as many companies privatised their water in order to be able to trade/sell it as an economic good. To add on, some large scale companies have privatised their land/factories in LEDC's where water can be found. This means that the people who live in the region of where the land was privatised, will lose their access to water as it is being used by the company.

### **Key Issues**

The key issue that effects this, is that water is being used too largely as a commodity, as it is double the amount that is being used for domestic means. Only 10% of water is used for domestic means, while 20% is used for industries, while the remaining 70% is used for irrigation (as estimated by the World Water Assessment Programme in 2012). Many people in LEDC's have lost, or limited rights to accessibility of clean water due to the privatisation of water by major companies.

Another issue is the fact that the world's population is growing by about 80 million people a year, which means that fresh water demand increases about 64 billion cubic meters a year, which the world cannot sustain as water resources are limited. The commodification of water makes it more difficult to be able to attain such a high demand, as water is being used as an economic good, instead of a public good.

Water sanitation is another key issue to the commodification of water, as many industries are moving from high-income countries to emerging market countries. Due to this, water pollution in those countries are rising quite dramatically. Up to 90% of wastewater in these developing countries flood untreated into rivers, lakes and highly productive coastal zones. This threatens health, food security and the accessibility of safe drinking water as well as water that can be used for sanitation. In fact, everyday, an average of 2 million tons of human waste is disposed in water courses. Due to projected increases in fertilizer use in wastewater effluents over the next three decades, there is an expected 10-20% increase in river nitrogen flows to coastal ecosystems, which could potentially harm the ecosystems as well as health, food etc.

### **UN Perspective:**

Water is a great concern of the UN, especially due to the fact that there is a millennium development goal that aims to be able to decrease the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015. The UN has also expressed its concerns towards the rights to water, as it has had several years of discussion, debate and negotiation about the rights to water. The UN Human Rights Council has adopted a resolution recognising that the human right to water and sanitation are a right an adequate standard of living.

### **Major Parties Involved and Their Views:**

#### **UN-Water**

The UN-Water has expressed concern towards the commodification of water, as it has greatly impacted many factors such as, but not limited to; social implications (some examples being health, sanitation), and environmental factors (some examples being pollution in bodies of water). However, UN-Water has not limited its concerns to only commodification and increasing effective rights to water, it has also expressed concern towards accessibility to water, water scarcity and water consumption.

#### **The UNCRC**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has expressed its concerns towards the rights to water. The UNCRC urges that state parties pursue full implementation of rights for children to be able to combat disease and malnutrition, healthcare, nutritious foods and as well as clean drinking water.

#### **ICESCR**

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed a detail definition of the content of the right of water in 2002. The ICESCR committee asserts that "The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses. An adequate amount of safe water is necessary to prevent death from dehydration, to reduce the risk of water-related disease and to provide for consumption, cooking, personal and domestic hygienic requirements. "

## **CEDAW**

The Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women is also concerned about the availability of water for both men and women in rural areas. As the committee urges to ensure that women receive the right to be able to enjoy adequate living conditions, as well as sustainable access for clean drinking water that can be used for domestic means.

## **UN Involvement:**

In July 28, 2010, the General Assembly created a resolution (A/64/292) on the "right to water". The "right to water" was acknowledged by 122 countries, who have previously discussed, debated and negotiated one the issue of the right to water. Two months after, on September 4, 2010, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that recognised that the human right to water and sanitation are a part to having an adequate standard of living.

## **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue:**

The "human right to water" places its responsibilities upon the governments to ensure that people enjoy "sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water, without discrimination". Governments are expected to take reasonable steps to avoid water contamination. However, due to the fact that this is placed upon the governments, some governments, especially those of LEDC's are unable to afford and/or accommodate sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water to its people, rendering the resolution to not be as helpful as it was planned to be. These LEDC's are usually also victims of water pollution from industrial factories, therefore making it even more difficult for them to be able to accommodate the requested water.

## **Timeline of Events:**

**1970's** - Fiscal Crisis caused a change in water governance. This caused value of water to increase.

**1980's** - Commodification of water increases. Water starts to transform into an economic good, however

is also still a public good in some countries/states.

**2000** - The UN came up with the Millennium Development Goals (including MDG 7C), which all 189 United member states, and at least 23 international organisations have agreed to achieve these goals by 2015.

**2002** - ICESCR expressed detail definition on the right to water.

**July 2010** - General Assembly created resolution on the “right to water”, which acknowledged by 122 countries

**September 2010** - Human rights council adopted a resolution that recognised the human right to water.

### **Possible Solutions:**

1. Possibly regular check ups done by groups like UN-Water, or similar in that manner, to be able to check the progress of water that is available for peoples domestic uses.
2. Limiting water consumption in industries, although this may cause an outcry from those industries due a possible lower income. However lower use of water as an economic good in the industry, will allow more water to be used a domestic good.
3. Limiting/eradicating the amount of wastewater that can be dumped in bodies of water, as this would provide safer water for those who live in the region around the body of water.
4. Using greener/eco-friendly materials in industries so that any wastewater that is dumped into bodies of water will not be as toxic.

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